Open Access

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I recently received a cold call from a company that promised it could save me £157 per month if I were to renew my mortgage with them. On registering my scepticism, the 'consultant' asked: 'so, you're not interested in saving £157?'. The question is irresistible: who could possibly turn down such an offer? The same kind of question is posed by supporters of open access publishing: 'so, you're not interested in as many people reading your research as possible?'. The problem with both questions is that they mask a complex set of contexts and conditions, yet present the issue in apparently simple terms.

Open access is a practice born of the digital age: anyone with a connection to the internet can access published research articles[1] without having to pay for them. But while recent developments in technology have enabled open access to become a reality, its principle drivers have a longer history. Put crudely, economics lurks behind the push for open access publication, and this is why the biomedical and experimental sciences have been pressing for and implementing open access so energetically. The sheer pace of experimental work, its published results and their effects on commercial applications have made the often slow turnaround times from submission to publication a hindrance to the swift availability of material for the academy, business and industry. The digital revolution in publishing helps to minimize processing time and maximize dissemination. The combination of these two aspects have made these disciplines early adopters of open access.

In addition, universities have become alarmed by the ever-burgeoning demands made on their library budgets as journal subscription charges balloon: publishers realized that they effectively had subscribers over a barrel due to their virtual monopoly on quality peer-reviewed titles and increased fees accordingly. It is no coincidence that

[1] The relationship of open access to edited collections, monographs, and practice-as-research raises a number of questions that are yet to be clarified and, in some cases, properly engaged with. I have restricted my piece to issues concerning publication in journals because this form has been subject to more debate, and hence a sense of what open access means for articles is slowly beginning to emerge.

scientific disciplines were the ones to find that their journals were the most expensive:[2] strong demand + limited supply = high price. The centrality of science-based disciplines in the academy has driven a number of higher education policies in the UK (including the establishment of the Research Assessment Exercise, the now abandoned use of bibliometrical data for all panels in the Research Excellence Framework, and the implementation of Doctoral Training Centres across the different research councils). The sciences' dominance is now affecting publishing in the arts and humanities, too.

The two main 'routes' to open access are referred to by colour: gold denotes publication in journals, green in repositories. It is important at this stage to note that payment for access via either route has no effect on their denotation. It is not the case that the gold route implies an article processing or publishing charge (APC) – online journals, for example, may accept articles for free, and the 'hybrid' option, discussed below, is also cost-free for the author. Similarly, institutional or other repositories, which are mainly free, may charge a fee in order to maintain or expand digital provision. However, the gold route is often associated with APCs and the green route is not, especially as many repositories are hosted in-house by universities.

The two routes already raise a number of questions. The gold route, preferred in the UK and recommended to the government by the Finch Report,[3] is often coupled with APCs if authors want to publish exclusively in established journals owned by major publishing groups. APCs, however, are often prohibitive for researchers who have little or no capacity to pay the eye-watering sums.[4]

One possibility of avoiding an APC involves the embargo of open publication for a defined period. Here, a subscription journal allows an article to appear in a free repository, but only after a set period of time. It is, however, unlikely that this system will have much purchase in the arts and humanities: the notoriously long turnaround times in our disciplines and the lack of urgency associated with the work itself come together to make open access embargos something of a toothless sanction. Unlike

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[2] See, for example, Lee C. van Orsdel and Katherine Born, 'Serial Wars', *Library Journal*, 132.7 (2007), 43-48.

[3] See Janet Finch et al, *Accessibility, Sustainability, Excellence: How to Expand Access to Research Publications*, June 2012 <http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Finch-Group-report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf> [accessed 14 February 2014], pp. 7-12.

[4] At the time of writing (February 2014), Taylor & Francis, the publisher of *CTR*, is charging £1,788 for its 'Open Select' programme.

results from experiments or trials that allow further work to be done in or by different laboratories, articles about Shakespeare, Stanislavsky or semiotics may well be read voraciously, but readers may not necessarily anticipate them with the same bated breath. Authors are often keen to have their work appear as quickly as possible, yet this is more a preference than a necessity. Consequently, the embargo of open publication has little commercial gain in the arts and humanities, and is a model that is unlikely to flourish. Indeed, the ability for readers to sit out the embargo period may well lead to a decline in journal subscriptions over time.

Publishers have thus proposed an alternative for researchers in the form of a 'hybrid' route that makes research available through both gold and green routes. This option may sound appealing because it continues to allow researchers to publish in established journals without having to pay a fee, while satisfying research council guidelines on open access. Terms and conditions, however, apply. Open access has given rise to a bifurcation of what used to be thought of as 'a single article'. Once upon a time, published research existed only in its final published version or, as it is now known, the 'version of record'. Now publishers will permit the 'author accepted version' to appear in a repository for open access, too. This is the version that *has* been peer-reviewed, but has not been subsequently edited or formatted. Publishers thus square the open-access circle by claiming exclusivity to a version that is unavailable to non-subscribers and permit open-access dissemination via a repository of a version that is yet to be edited.

This may appear to offer a workable solution: scholars continue to enjoy the old system of publication without payment and have to make a small sacrifice by depositing an inferior version of their articles in an open access repository. After all, most universities subscribe to the major journals in the field, and so it is likely that peers and colleagues will be reading the polished and corrected version. Yet in an age of globalization, a worldwide audience may wish to read material for which it cannot pay, and, over time, authors may find that material that has not benefited from expert feedback, suggestions and editing is becoming the informal 'version of record', and this may leave a bitter taste.

If open access thus leads to a splitting of articles into the version of record and the author-accepted version in the context of subscription journals, might in-house online publishing offer authors a single version, for which they nonetheless pay no APC? At face value, the answer is 'yes'. Authors and peer reviewers rarely receive a fee for

their work, and editors may or may not be paid by a commercial publisher. That is, publishing houses' costs are usually associated with processes of production and the professional staff involved therewith. Thus, editors can set up their own journals at minimal cost, especially as their institutions will probably offer web space either for free or at very low cost.

There are already a number of online journals and they suffer, like their print counterparts once did, from the problem of credibility: they need to be able to establish themselves as quality sources of information. At present, such journals are necessarily young, and I can do little more than speculate on their futures. However, certain trends in online science publishing illuminate some of the issues at stake. The *Public Library of Science* (known more widely as *PLoS*) is a trailblazer in open access science publishing. It charges APCs[5] to researchers in countries that can afford them while offering free publication or low one-off fees to those in the developing world. This is possibly the most successful open access publication network, yet its criteria for acceptance are somewhat open themselves. While the journal will not publish unoriginal or unethical material, one of its criteria is that 'experiments, statistics, and other analyses are performed to a high technical standard and are described in sufficient detail'.[6] Thus, scientific soundness forms the basis of publication and a formal category provides the main barrier to publication.

One might think that this is a discipline-specific issue, because arts and humanities research is concerned with the quality of argument, the rigour of locating an object of study in its field, and the novelty of ideas. The *Humanities Directory*, an open access journal, offers criteria 'adapted from the *PLoS ONE* website'.[7] The *Online Library of the Humanities*, also seeks to ape *PLoS* and states on its website: 'the truly interesting thing about the *PLoS* model though is that *PLoS ONE* publishes not based upon importance, but upon accuracy and then lets the scientific community decide what

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[5] At the time of writing, the most expensive titles, *PLoS Medicine* and *PLoS Biology*, charge authors $2,900; the cheapest title, *PLoS ONE*, charges the not insubstantial fee of $1,350.

[6] Anon, '*PLoS ONE* Publication Criteria', no date, <http://www.plosone.org/static/publication> [accessed 14 February 2014].

[7] Humanities Directory, 'Guidelines for Authors', no date, <http://www.humanitiesdirectory.com/index.php/humanitiesdirectory/pages/view/authors_guidelines_authors> [accessed 14 February 2014].

research stands out.'[8] On this reasoning, one could publish an accepted doctoral thesis without any further work because it would be 'correct'. However, it is clear that published theses regularly differ from those held in university libraries, and there are important reasons for this. Science's 'formal' hurdle does not translate easily into arts and humanities publishing.

This open-door approach to open-access publishing is worrying. The strength of a publication is not a formal quality alone, but is based on thorough review. While the editing process itself is open to the subjective values of peer reviewers and editors, the system at least provides two stages of rigorous assessment before publication. Readers require an amount of assurance that what they are going to read is worth reading. Allowing them to decide on an article's value is something that readers have always done.

Open access also comes with one more caveat: the terms of the publication's license. 'Old-style' publishing established copyright terms stipulating that material had to be quoted and cited accurately. Open access has allied itself with a number of licenses developed by Creative Commons that allow work to be 'copied, distributed, edited, remixed and built upon'.[9] The final three terms may cause the most anxiety to scholars who want their words quoted as they stood on the original page. It is little surprise that the survey into open access conducted in 2011 by Taylor & Francis, to which 14,700 people responded, noted that academics favoured the most restrictive Creative Commons license and overwhelmingly rejected its most liberal one.[10]

Open access is undoubtedly here to stay, yet the tortoise-like speed with which arts and humanities researchers have engaged with it perhaps says something about our disciplines' propensity to defer to all its corollaries. There are qualitative differences between the disciplines that have embraced open access and those that have been more wary. These distinctions may yet prove the means by which academics in

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[8] Open Library of Humanities, 'The OLH Model', no date <https://www.openlibhums.org/about/the-olh-model/> [accessed 14 February 2014].
[9] Creative Commons, 'About the Licenses', no date <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/> [accessed 14 February 2014].
[10] See Will Frass, Jo Cross and Victoria Gardner, 'Open Access Survey: Exploring the Views of Taylor & Francis and Routledge Authors', March 2013, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/explore/Open-Access-Survey-March2013.pdf> [accessed 14 February 2014], pp. 9-10.

theatre and performance call time on practices that appear to run counter to the standards associated with publication at present.

There are perhaps two main issues that lie at the heart of the open access debate for theatre and performance scholars. First, a proliferation of open access outlets, whose quality threshold is defined formally, runs the risk of creating a two-tier system in which established journals imply higher research quality while no-APC, online journals gain a reputation for taking (virtually) anything. The effects of such a development have negative effects on both readers and authors: readers may choose to avoid such journals, while authors find that their work fares badly in research assessments and before promotion boards. Second, the effect of open access rivals on existing journal publishers may have unforeseen consequences. Clearly, the invention of the hybrid model effectively allows a kind of 'business as normal' for publishers, although it implies a serious change for authors who have to countenance two versions of the same piece existing simultaneously. Yet if demand for established journals falls away, then publishers may find it increasingly difficult to subsidize monographs with profits from journal titles. Monographs are relatively unimportant in the sciences, yet theatre and performance scholars may find it difficult to place books in future if they become economically unviable for publishers to produce.

The world of open access publishing is still in its infancy in theatre and performance studies and, as always, only time will tell whether it is a blessing, a curse, or a mixture of the two. There is no reason to believe that open access journals, run by specialists with experience of peer review and editing, cannot establish important titles. Yet the trend towards 'mega-journals' (that shovel as many arts and humanities disciplines together, use questionable acceptance criteria and recruit banks of 'editors' through mass emails) may give rise to lower overall research quality. At very least, researchers in our disciplines should have the requisite scepticism to understand open access as more than just a medium of dissemination and to appreciate the implications that are, in part, already evident. Whether concerted action follows, in theatre and performance studies, or more widely in the arts and humanities, remains to be seen.